

Seasons of Army Mentorship and the Mentoring Staircase

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INTRODUCTION

Although mentoring is an inherent responsibility of all Army leaders, not all mentors will have the same degree of success or experience the same depth of mentor development. While some officers will thrive and grow as mentors, others will never quite get the hang of it. Despite this natural disparity in individual mentoring potential and ability, I have come to believe that there is a clear pattern of growth unfolding throughout the careers of effective Army mentors. The purpose of this paper is to share the seasonal-like aspects of mentoring I have witnessed in my own career and the discovery of a model, the Mentoring Staircase, which accurately reflects and charts my own personal growth, as a protégé and mentor, over the past 26 years, and into the future.

Throughout this paper, I will use as an example the mentoring development of a due course officer (commissioned as a second lieutenant with no constructive credit, peaking at the rank of colonel, and retiring after 30 years), the situation with which I am most familiar. However, I think sufficient parallels exist for those who are commissioned at higher ranks and receive constructive credit, the timelines need merely be adjusted accordingly. Despite this small degree of timeline variability, I hope that all students of Army mentoring will find this discussion relevant and will benefit from this critical, introspective analysis.

SEASONS OF ARMY MENTORSHIP

While the metaphor of life being a series of 4 consecutive seasons is not a new concept, I am not aware of it being used to describe Army mentoring. However, the seasonal analogy does make perfect sense. A newly commissioned officer is “planted” in the fertile soil of the Army and then he or she is (hopefully) nurtured and helped to grow. Having grown, the mid-career officer takes his or her place as an Army leader and, in turn, helps others to learn and

grow. As eligibility for retirement approaches, the officer begins to think about the remaining time that is left and what will be his or her legacy. Finally, the senior officer enters the last stage of his or her career, tying up loose ends, and ultimately retiring. So are the seasons of Army mentorship, from spring to winter, from beginning to end.

SPRING: BEING MENTORED

Spring is the first season in Army mentorship and is a time of profound personal and professional growth. The primary goal during this initial period is for our new officer to become fully competent in his or her career field. Typically, this early season encompasses the company grade ranks of second lieutenant through captain. The fact that this initial developmental interval lasts roughly 10 years is not arbitrary. According to researchers who study experts and expertise, it normally takes about 10 years for one to truly master one’s craft and become an expert. This decade of mastery is often referred to in the professional literature on expertise as the “Ten Year Rule.”¹ It consistently applies across all domains of human expertise: chess, athletics, music, and, in my opinion, mentoring.

During this initial phase, our newly minted officer is focused on learning his or her various duties and what it means to be a commissioned Army officer. Hopefully, competent senior officers are actively mentoring the young officer. Additionally, the company grade officer is also growing through self-study and self-reflection. Given these facts, our junior officer is identified as a Protégé. Now, that is not to say that the young officer is not in some limited way mentoring others. For example, he or she may be guiding enlisted personnel or conducting peer mentoring, like showing a fellow junior officer how to perform a specific task. But, the Protégé has not fully matured and is not yet prepared to mentor other officers in full scope and depth of mentorship, such as career development, maintaining competitiveness for

promotion, balancing career and family, etc. Simply put, one cannot expect to fully and properly mentor what one has not yet personally experienced and consequently mastered.

SUMMER: BECOMING A MENTOR

After the completion of his or her first 10 years, our young field grade officer has reached many important milestones. First, he or she has been promoted 3 times, thereby demonstrating both past success and future potential. Additionally, this officer has successfully tackled 3 or 4 different assignments and acquired a modicum of experience. In some cases, the officer has earned a graduate degree and achieved specialty board certification. With regards to making the Army a career, this officer has passed the critical halfway point to 20 years, and has usually committed to the Army for at least another decade. All of these factors combine to make the young major ripe and ready to don the role of a Mentor, one who guides and develops company grade officers.

On top of his or her game in terms of technical expertise and having a burning desire to share what he or she knows, our young Mentor makes the first serious attempts to deeply mentor junior officers. If the new Mentor has been properly groomed by others, he or she will seek to learn from and emulate the mentoring behavior of those personal mentors (sometimes successfully, sometimes unsuccessfully). Officers who were not mentored strive to give others the important guidance and direction that they were denied and had to learn for themselves, often the hard way. In both cases, the fledgling Mentors will have to learn by trial and error. Hence, this aspiring Mentor will again follow the Ten Year Rule and spend the next decade perfecting his or her mentoring skills and developing a unique, individual style of mentorship. At the end of this important decade of mentoring growth, our striving Mentor will emerge as a fully competent mentor of young protégés.

AUTUMN: BECOMING A MASTER MENTOR

Another major milestone in any Army career is hitting the highly coveted 20-year mark. For some, it is the time to retire and open the next chapter of life. For others, they are still climbing the ladder of Army success with “stars in their eyes” and no apparent end in sight. However, for a select few, it is a time of great introspection with thoughts shifting towards what they

want to accomplish before retirement, whenever that will inevitably occur. Regardless of their situation, these fully vested senior officers have ideally perfected their skills as mentors, developing many junior officers and teaching them how to be competent junior Army leaders. Many of the younger officers that they have mentored over the years are now entering the “summer” of their own careers and are starting to take on protégés of their own. Hence, the mentoring focus for our senior field grade officer shifts to teaching their long-time protégés, as well as others, how to mentor. In order to denote this important passage into a new, deeper level of mentoring, I choose to designate this senior field grade officer as a Master Mentor, or mentor of mentors.

Hopefully, this Master Mentor has had the benefit of quality mentoring during his or her early protégé years and has spent another decade learning how to mentor young protégés. In this later season of Autumn, our Master Mentor is now sharing with the mentor-in-training the essential skills for mentoring another officer. As in the previous two seasons, this development period can last as long as 10 years. Although, for some Master Mentors it may be shorter, depending upon when they retire or whether or not they reach the next and final plateau of mentoring (discussed below). Instinctively, this senior officer seeks guidance from his or her own mentors, most, if not all of whom have retired. In addition to reflecting upon personal experiences, Master Mentors often conduct independent research into the field of mentoring in order to further grasp its fullest dimensions. He or she also actively seeks out other master mentors to share experiences and learn from these sagacious peers. For some, such as me, mentoring becomes a deep passion and one of the primary reasons that these dedicated officers remain on active duty and defer their retirement, often despite the “Sirens’ song” of lucrative career opportunities beyond the Army.

WINTER: THE LEGACY OF THE GRAND MASTER MENTOR

As in nature, the final season of Army mentoring is Winter. The Winter of Army mentoring is marked by both the impending finality of retirement and the deep compelling desire to leave some lasting legacy. For those very few officers that reach this highest plane of mentoring, this season is marked by a rare ability to rise above their role as a Master Mentor and reflect

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about how to mentor other master mentors. In essence, the Grand Master Mentor is a mentor of mentors of mentors. The epitome of the Grand Master Mentor is the wise and humble character of Yoda, in the *Star Wars* movie saga. Like Yoda, our Grand Master Mentor fully understands the entire mentoring process and how all of the seasons fit together into an overall lifecycle of mentoring. Within the Army Medical Department, many consultants, assistant corps chiefs, and corps chiefs are able to successfully ascend to the role of Grand Master Mentor. For some, their ultimate goal is to establish a culture of self-

perpetuating mentoring for all of their officers and maximize the overall effectiveness of each season of the Army mentoring lifecycle. Given that, our Grand Master Mentor has the unique opportunity to make profound and lasting changes in his or her Area of Concentration (AOC) and, perhaps, even beyond.

THE MENTORING STAIRCASE

In addition to viewing the growth of a mentor in terms of successive seasons, it is also useful to look at mentoring development as ascending steps, each building upon the previous ones, like a staircase. Figure 1 depicts the Mentoring Staircase, a model which shows how each mentoring step builds upon what is learned in the previous stages. In the first phase, the Protégé step, the officer is engaged in self-development while receiving guidance from a Mentor. As previously discussed, this time period lasts about 10 years until promotion to major for due course officers. Eventually, the newly promoted field grade takes the next step, placing a junior company grade officer under his or her wing and proceeding to show the young protégé the ropes. During this second decade, the Mentor further develops and hones skills in mentoring company grade officers. (Also, the Mentor continues to self-develop while receiving mentoring from a Master Mentor). After the 20-year mark is passed, presuming the officer does not retire, there is an opportunity for a deepening of the mentoring role with this Mentor stepping up to becoming a Master Mentor and developing midcareer

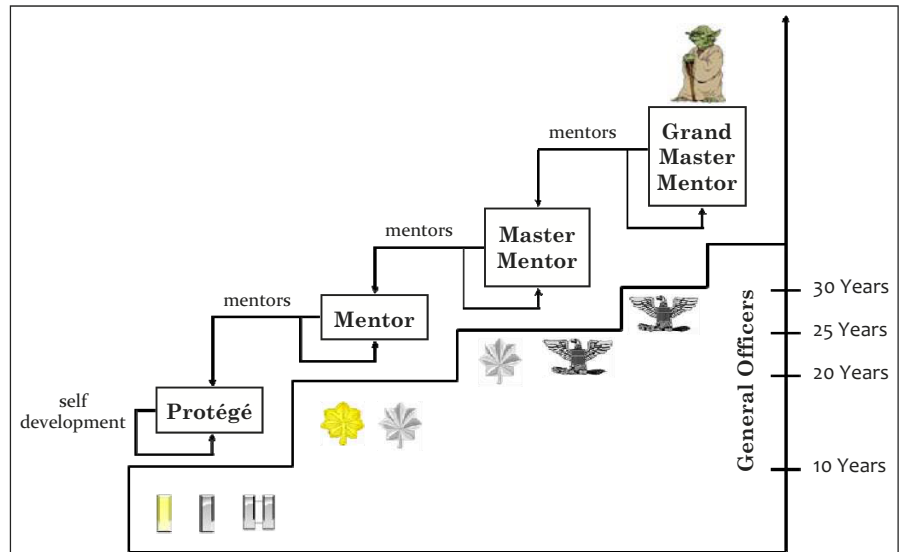


Figure 1. The Mentoring Staircase.

protégés in the fine art of becoming Mentors themselves. (Ideally, there is a senior officer mentoring him or her in addition to this officer engaged in self-development). Lastly, our “crusty, old” mentor takes the final step up the Mentoring Staircase and becomes a Grand Master Mentor, guiding Master Mentors on how to effect lasting change and growth.

COMBINING THE MODELS:

A PERSONAL EXPERIENCE — THE EAGLE IN WINTER

Finally, it is possible to combine both models, the Seasons of Army Mentorship with the Mentoring Staircase. Figure 2 illustrates this superimposition of models with regard to my own Army career. The journey began with my commissioning in 1983 and will ultimately end with my mandatory retirement date in 2013. During the Spring, the first decade of my career, I was at the Protégé step, blessed to have an outstanding Mentor who really taught me what it meant to be an Army officer. I spent this first season relentlessly pursuing personal development and excellence. With promotion to major, I entered the Summer of my career, becoming a Mentor and guiding several company grade officers by sharing what I had learned over the previous decade. In 2003, I hit my 20-year mark and the Autumn of my career, becoming a Master Mentor and beginning to share with wider audiences, in lectures and in writings, what I had learned about mentoring.²⁻⁴ On the occasion of my quarter century in the Army, I was nominated and appointed by the Army Surgeon General as the AOC

Consultant for my career field, taking the final step to become a Grand Master Mentor and guiding others on how to set up mentoring programs and develop mentors.⁵ In fact, this very article is but another affirmation of my own passage from Master Mentor to Grand Master Mentor and entrance into the Winter of my career.

SUMMARY

The purpose of this paper is to share 2 complimentary models for the growth and development of Army mentors, the Seasons of Army Mentorship model and the Mentoring Staircase model. During the first phase of development, Spring, a young officer starts out on the first step as a Protégé, receives mentoring, and learns self-mastery. After a decade of learning and promotion to field grade, the more experienced officer enters the Summer of his or her career and steps up to become a Mentor, mentoring protégés. With the arrival of retirement eligibility, those Autumnal officers who do not retire can take an additional step and evolve into Master Mentors who teach others how to effectively mentor. Lastly, in the twilight years of Winter, those who reach the highest level of Army mentoring can take the final step and become Grand

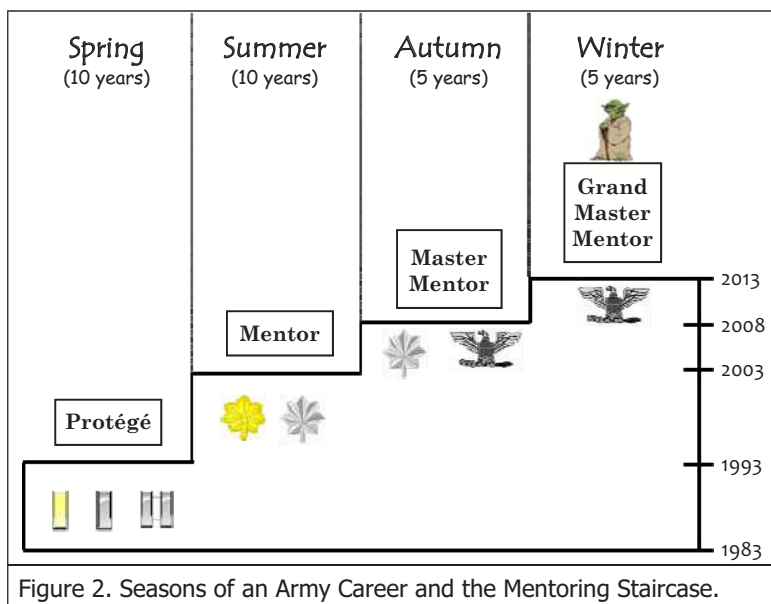


Figure 2. Seasons of an Army Career and the Mentoring Staircase.

Master Mentors, establishing a long lasting culture of mentoring that will be a fitting legacy to their leadership and example. To close, I sincerely hope that those reading this article are inspired by this discourse and strive to make the most out of their own mentor journey and reach their greatest mentoring potential, whatever that may be. I know for me personally, it has become the most satisfying accomplishment of my Army career.

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